

THE LONG ROAD HOME

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Summary: It was the summer that changed everything. Hopper is gone, or so we think, and El is having to learn to adapt. A story about love, growth and change. Mileven central but with all the canon characters and some new ones. Follow Mike and El through the ups and down over those 3 months, leading to a season 4 style story. Rated Teen.

1. Sirens

The Long Road Home

AN: Hi everyone! I'm back with a brand new Mileven fanfic for you :-) Don't worry, I haven't forgotten about The Dark Side epilogue, The Differences Between Us or The Life We Deserve. They are all coming along, but this one has peaked my interest the most at the moment.

It starts on July 4th 1985 and will cover some missing moments over those 3 months. It will then become my prediction of season 4.

I hope you enjoy it :-)

Chapter 1 - Sirens

The sound of sirens echoed loudly through the parking lot of the Starcourt Mall. The air was warm but sheets of light rain washed over the fire fighters, soldiers and emergency workers that rushed around.

El watched on through bleary eyes, the exhaustion of using her powers to the extreme and her injuries making her feel weak and lethargic. The only thing keeping her in the moment was the comfort of the boy next to her. *Mike*. Her pounding and bandaged head lay against his shoulder as he murmured things to her, to keep them *both* talking, to try and ease the madness surrounding them.

"I don't know which hospital they will take us to. I mean, Hawkins hospital has got to be closed right?"

El merely nodded but hoped he would continue, his voice was all the soothing balm she needed. But before Mike could do more than open his mouth, one of the paramedics returned to where El and Mike were sat at the back of the ambulance.

He was holding a clipboard and had just come out of the ambulance next to them where Lucas and Max were sitting. El knew this because she could hear her best friend was still crying, it caused an ache in her heart and she blinked rapidly, wishing she had no more tears to

shed but they still slid down her bruised cheeks. The image of humanity returning into Billy's blue eyes before he sacrificed himself flickered into the front of El's mind and she swallowed hard.

"Can I take your names and a contact number for your parents please?" the paramedic asked both El and Mike. They shared a glance, secretly acknowledging that Mike would go first. His words were almost lost in the background noise of sirens, engines, shouts and helicopter wings chopping through the air.

"And you young lady?"

El blinked and realised that the medic was now staring at her, concern creasing his already wrinkled forehead. "My name is J-Jane...Jane Hopper..."

"Hopper," the paramedic nodded as he started to scrawl the words. He frowned in confusion and looked up at El. "Hopper? Where have I heard that name?"

"Her dad's the Chief of Police here in Hawkins," Mike jumped in, quickly explaining.

"Oh yes of course," the paramedic nodded, smiling slightly at the couple. "I suspect he's already here then."

"He will be here...soon," El mumbled, trying to ease the anxiety that was twisting her nerves.

"My mom is gonna flip," Mike sighed as they watched the paramedic walk over to Will. "And I don't even know what excuse we're going to use yet." He turned to look at El who was watching as four men pulled a stretcher out of the mall, her stomach dropped as her eyes moved to the starch white sheet that was tucked around the body, making the shape of the man very obvious.

"Billy," El choked, her eyes captivated as she felt more tears drip off her jaw and into her clenched hands.

"Hey," Mike said gently, his own voice shaky as his warm palm moved to El's wet cheek and pulled her focus away from Billy. Her wide hazel eyes danced over Mike's pale face, her racing heart

starting to calm as she got hypnotised by her love's dark eyes. "Don't look alright? It won't help anything, we couldn't save him El."

"But he saved me," she croaked, her eyes searching Mike's. "He saved me."

Mike gulped and nodded slowly, accepting her words. "He did El. And we will always remember that and be thankful for it." He closed his eyes for a moment and exhaled a shaky breath. When he opened his eyes they were softer as he stared at El, "I will always be thankful to him for saving you. You mean everything to me. I...l"

"Mom!"

El turned her head sharply in the direction of Will's voice. He was running from the paramedic to the centre of the parking lot where Joyce was stood. He practically collapsed into her arms, or was it the other way around?

"El where are you going?" Mike called as he watched his girlfriend throw the blanket they had been given by the paramedic off her shoulders as she jumped off the ledge of the ambulance and stumbled forward.

"Joyce is here," she said without looking at her boyfriend, her eyes scanning the crowd. "That means Hop is here too."

She began to wander but stayed close to the ambulance not wanting to venture far from Mike. The red whirling sirens had made the rain slightly distorted but El could still see clearly enough to look for Hopper. That anxiety she had felt twisting her stomach into a deep knot seemed to be moving further up her body, her heartbeat was pounding in her ears as she finally looked at Joyce, wanting an explanation.

Joyce's dark eyes locked with El's and in that moment everything changed.

Her eyes told a story of sorrow, something El knew well. *Gone*. He was gone.

It felt like her whole world crumbled below her feet. She was still

standing and yet she couldn't feel the rain that showered over her because her heart was breaking. It was an agony in her chest and a sudden heaviness in her soul. The only thing she could liken it to was seeing her mother's light leaving her eyes when she was forced into a catatonic state.

Tears poured but she didn't notice, she shuddered and sobbed, her mind rushing with images of Hop, her *dad*. The man who took her in, who gave her a home. The man she realised that she had *loved*. Did he know that? Did he know she saw him as the father she should have always had? Memories rushed across her eyes, so powerful her breath became erratic as she tried to stabilise herself. Her whole body was shivering and shaking until she was engulfed into a pair of slim arms, holding her tight.

"El what's happened?" Mike's panicked voice rang through her ears. But she couldn't speak, not even to him. She was numb and in shock. How could her dad, Hopper, the *Chief of Police* be dead? He was strong, capable and brave. It couldn't possibly be true. But there was a lingering truth pressing against her heavy heart. Hop would do *anything* to protect her. He would sacrifice himself if needed because he had loved her. Just like Sara, El was his daughter.

"Joyce," Mike asked breathlessly as footsteps became apparent to El's ears as she sobbed in her boyfriend's arms, burying her face into his chest. "What happened?"

"Mom?" came Will's worried voice.

"It's...it's H-Hop," Joyce wavered, taking a loud and sharp breath in as she tried to continue but failed to speak as she stepped forward and joined Mike, wrapping her arms around El and encompassing her in love.

"No," Mike choked, shaking his head. "No he...h-he can't be. He's...*Hopper*..." His voice trailed off, shock taking over his face, his eyes wide and unblinking as he laid his cheek against El's hair, pulling her closer, wanting to protect her from the pain but knowing there was nothing he could do, it was *agony*.

"What's happened?" came Dustin's voice, followed by Lucas and

Steve. There were whispers and gasps of shock as Will filled them in on the devastating news, Joyce and Mike not speaking or leaving their protective shield of El as she cried.

The rain continued to pour and life went on around them, the firefighters were busy inside of the mall, the soldiers were still in the underground lair trying to find clues as to where the Russians had disappeared to and in the centre of the parking lot, El stood surrounded by the people she loved the most, but feeling the emptiness for the one who was missing.

It was too loud. The beeping of the machines, the loud shouts of the medical staff as they tried to organise everyone into hospital beds, the squeak of the wheels turning quickly on the trolleys that were rushed down the corridors towards surgery.

Joyce flinched at every sound, her heart beat pounding in her ears and her head heavy and painful. Her eyes were red and sore and she wrapped her arms around herself, pacing in front of El and Will's hospital beds, they were thankfully in cubicles next to one another. All the kids were.

Her brown eyes flickered around the room wanting to check up on all of the children at the same time. She had to make sure they were okay, that was the most important thing right now. Not her own pain, not the agony that had opened up in her heart. All she could see in her mind was his eyes, the acceptance in them. The look on his face, that *smile* of understanding. Of knowing what she had to do and what they would both lose.

There was a gasp of pain, a few curse words hissed out as Joyce quickly hurried over to her eldest son. *Screw privacy* she thought as she yanked back the curtain surrounding his bay, ignoring the nurses who explained he was being examined.

Jonathan was laying on his side, his legs curled up in agony as one of the doctors examined his back. Joyce's gaze went immediately to where the health professional was carefully touching and she choked in shock. His whole spine and back was bruised, blood vessels clearly broken as his skin had come up black and blue.

"Jonathan are you okay?" Nancy called from the next cubicle, clear panic in her voice.

"Y-Yeah," he winced out, his eyes tightly shut and his whole face scrunched up in pain.

Joyce sighed, exhaustion deflating her tense body as she walked around to face Jonathan and knelt down in front of him, reaching for his clenched hand. His eyes opened wide in surprise for a moment, and Joyce wondered if he was confused why she was with him and not Will. A poorly timed guilt riddled her stomach as she realised that she had been so worried about Will these last few years but not Jonathan. And yet here he was in agony, trying his best to keep in the sounds of pain his body wanted to scream out.

The doctor spoke about a scan, worried about the damage that the "explosion" had caused. *Explosion*. That was what they were saying had happened? She merely nodded, her shaky fingers brushing Jonathan's hair back as she gently squeezed his hand.

"You're so brave," she told him, her voice wavering. "I'm here for you."

And that was where she stayed until the doctor came back and advised that Jonathan would go down for his scan. Joyce leant down, kissing her son's sweaty forehead and watched with an ache in her heart as he was wheeled away.

She could only rest for barely a second before her eyes were back on the rest of the kids. Will, Steve, Dustin and the girl, Robin was it? Were stood at the end of Lucas's bed, sipping from foam cups, steam swirling from the containers as they spoke quietly, murmuring words Joyce couldn't pick up on.

Mr and Mrs Sinclair had just arrived and were stood at the top of the bed, Erica and Lucas both sat in front of them while their parents went between hugging them and scolding them for being at the mall out of hours.

"Lucas Charles Sinclair you are *grounded*," Mrs Sinclair said in a weepy voice before grabbing her son and clutching onto him. She

squeezed her eyes closed and tears ran down her cheeks. "Never do that to us again."

"You too young lady," Mr Sinclair said as he held tightly onto Erica. Her arms around her dad's neck and her cheek pressed against his chest as she rolled her eyes.

Lucas didn't seem to even respond to his parents, he wasn't even looking at them. His focus was on his girlfriend, who was lying on her side on the bed nearest the window. No one could see her face and it was very clear Lucas wanted to be with her and not be stuck in a choke hold from his mother.

Joyce looked over at Max and sighed heavily, knowing that no matter what Billy had done, Max had lost a brother tonight.

She walked carefully over to her, her footsteps barely making a sound against the linoleum tiles. "Max?" Joyce asked calmly as she moved around the bed. Her eyes filled with sympathy as she looked at the young girl. Always so sassy and vibrant, but now she looked traumatised and so very young.

Her blue eyes were red and watery, she was clasping onto her own hands and shaking slightly as she stared out of the small window with no clear focus. They had bandaged her head, examined her already and now she was waiting for a CT scan. Joyce grabbed one of the plastic chairs, intent on pulling it next to Max, when she faltered, giving into her motherly instincts as she sank down onto the thin mattress instead.

"Come here sweetheart," Joyce said soothingly, opening her arms up for Max. She wasn't sure if the red head would take the offer, especially not with the stories Will told her about Max's upbringing, explaining *why* she was so strong minded and almost closed off.

But with Max's walls down, her blue swollen eyes slowly moved from the window until they landed on Joyce's understanding and warm gaze. Her lower lip trembled and a sob escaped her throat as she sat up and reached for the mother. Joyce held her tight, swallowing the lump in her own throat, as she looked up at the ceiling and tried to prevent the tears that formed anyway. She rubbed Max's back gently

and rocked her as she cried. There were no words sometimes.

There was some commotion by the entrance to the ward and Joyce looked up, cradling Max's head as she continued to cry. She felt a heaviness tug at her stomach when she saw that Susan and Neil Hargrove had arrived. Susan looked in shock, her eyes wide and her face clammy as she searched the bays for her daughter. Neil stood back, his jaw twitching, anger flashing in his eyes.

Finally Susan spotted Joyce with Max and hurried over. "Maxine! Oh honey, are you alright?"

Max lifted her heavy head, surprise in her eyes that her mother was there. She seemed to lose all hesitations in the moment as she reached for Susan, Joyce willingly let her go. She watched on as the mother and daughter held onto each other tightly, Susan asking all sorts of questions in a panicked voice, wanting to know how this happened and the worst, where was Billy.

Joyce looked over at Neil who was stood now at the end of the bed, his whole demeanour was defensive and militant. She hoped he wasn't going to shout at his stepdaughter, Joyce could only assume he thought that Max and Billy had broken into the mall out of hours. It was an extremely distressing thought to know that they were all aware of Billy's death except for his own father and stepmom.

Thankfully that moment was short lived when a doctor and Officer Powell stepped forward, a grave look on both of their faces. "Mr Hargrove? Mrs Hargrove? Would you mind coming with us?"

"Is this about my son?" Neil asked abruptly, his lip curling slightly. "Did *he* cause this?" His tone and stature couldn't make it more obvious that he blamed his son for whatever he thought had happened that night. Joyce was thankful that he would never know the full truth. He would never know that his son was possessed and the dark things he had done under that possession.

Powell nodded, shifting uncomfortably for a moment. "We would prefer to discuss this privately."

"Susan," Neil said sharply in response, not even looking at his wife.

He continued to stare at Officer Powell, distrust in his shrewd eyes.

Susan pulled away hesitantly from Max, looking between her daughter and her husband. It was clear that she wanted to stay by her daughter's side, but she slowly pulled away. She turned to look at Max, guilt in her eyes. "We will be back in a minute honey. You just rest."

Max nodded slowly, her face tight with anxiety as she knew exactly what her mother and stepfather were about to find out. She carefully got back into bed and was joined moments later by an impatient looking Lucas who had finally escaped his mother's grasp.

Feeling that Max was being suitably looked after, Joyce hesitantly walked towards the opposite cubicle which had its curtains drawn. She subconsciously bit her lower lip, anxiety riddled her body. Joyce knew that this should have been the *first* person she came to check on, not one of the last. But she was struggling, struggling to comprehend her part in Hopper's end.

If it weren't for her, El would have her dad by her side right now. No doubt ordering the staff around, demanding that his daughter gets all the special treatment she deserved, as well as an Eggo Extravaganza served straight to her hospital bed.

A small smile of humour twitched Joyce's lips for a moment, the same time a tear slid down her cheek. She took a shaky breath and quickly wiped at the tear and the next few that silently fell. Taking a deep breath through her nose and out of her mouth, Joyce finally steadied herself to face El. She slowly pulled back the curtain and halted at the sight in front of her.

El was lying on the bed, her slim frame shuddering from what Joyce could only assume were sobs. She wasn't alone though. *Of course.*

Mike was sitting up against the headboard, cradling his girlfriend close as her heart broke for Hopper. They both had bandages on their heads and Mike had carefully wrapped his left arm around El's shoulders, his fingers gently playing with the strands of her wavy hair while his right hand rubbed soothingly up and down her arm in circular motions.

Joyce didn't know what to say, her mouth was dry unlike the wetness of her tired eyes. She caught Mike's gaze and realised there was no one that could help El as much as Mike could right now. She kept his stare for a moment before accepting this, nodding at him slowly before leaving the cubicle and closing the curtain to give El privacy once more.

Just as Joyce turned back to face the room she jumped at the presence of Dr Sam Owens who was standing beside her. He gave her a small fleeting smile of apology for scaring her and then motioned to the corridor. "Can we have a word?"

"Here will do," Sam murmured quietly as he walked down the corridor with Joyce, not far from the ward where the kids were located. There was the sound of raised voices and Joyce couldn't help but look to the opposite room, the door was closed but through the small pane of glass she could easily see the Hargroves being told the news of Billy. Susan looked shocked, her face stunned into silence, but Neil was cursing at Powell and the doctors demanding to know how this could have happened. He didn't even look sad, just angry.

"Come on Joyce," Owens said with a sad sigh, bringing Joyce out of her reverie. She shook her head slightly, trying to clear the tiredness and emotions that were desperately trying to surface. She bit her cheek and nodded at Sam, leading the way into the room as he closed the door behind them.

"Did you find them?" Joyce immediately blurted out, wanting to get to the point. She couldn't bear to be away from the kids this long, especially now.

"Them?" Sam asked, his brow lowering in confusion as he pulled a chair out and offered one to Joyce. She shook her head to decline his offer.

"The *Russians*," Joyce responded in a hushed tone, her eyes darting between the closed door and the doctor.

"Oh," Sam said gravely as he sat down. "I'm sorry to say that we haven't. It's clear that they were there of course, and the team are still

down there, gathering the evidence. But they were gone by the time we arrived."

Joyce nodded, anger at the soldiers escaping frustrating her for a moment. A pain ached in her chest, reminding her that it was there, waiting for the moment it was allowed to be felt. She bit her lip and looked out of the window at the dark sky, a few stars seemed to twinkle and it all looked so beautiful compared with the pain she was feeling.

"And...was there anyone else down? Did you find anyone?" She spoke the words but didn't even look at Sam, her eyes still on those sparkling stars.

Owens sighed heavily, she didn't need to have said his name for the doctor to know who she was talking about. "He wasn't down there Joyce. I'm sorry."

Joyce tried to swallow the lump in her throat as her eyes squeezed shut, her breathing uneven and sharp as she tried to process this information. She had prayed there was a chance, even a small chance that Hop had survived. Maybe he had been lying unconscious and she just hadn't seen him. But when she had seen the scientists be obliterated by their own weapon she felt like hope was gone.

"Joyce, we need to talk about Eleven."

Her eyes opened with a start and she turned to look at Owens, concern flickering into her already anxious face. "What about El?"

Dr Owens fidgeted uncomfortably for a moment but then looked at Joyce with sympathy in his eyes. "*El* has lost her guardian Joyce. She's lost her protection. Her mother isn't of sound mind to look after her, her biological father according to all accounts is dead. Jim was all she had."

"She can stay with me, I will be her guardian. If you think I'm going to let you take her away and lock her up, you are going to have to kill not only me, but all of those kids! Because not *one* of us will let you take her." Joyce answered immediately, her voice filled with indignation that Owens could ever think she would abandon El or

allow her to go back to being treated like a scientific experiment.

A smile of admiration flickered on Sam's lips for a moment, confusing Joyce. "I'm not here to take her away. Nor will she ever be locked up again, you have my word. It was not my intention to scare you, I merely need you to understand that her Aunt, Becky Ives will need to be informed. She may want to become El's guardian..."

"Oh," Joyce answered after a moment, her voice faltering. That heaviness in her stomach only seemed to expand.

"We will need to speak to Becky and of course ask El what she would prefer, once she has recovered of course. In the meantime, I think she should stay with you. And please don't worry about her paperwork, I've got her health insurance documents here," Owens explained, pulling out paperwork that looked official to Joyce's eyes. "The staff won't ask any questions about her, she is protected."

Sam stood up, grasping onto the paperwork and looking at Joyce thoughtfully. "If you do get granted guardianship of El...I think you may want to consider if Hawkins is the right place for not only her, but your family," he said solemnly, his eyes looking around the room. "The media coverage is going to be a nightmare, so stay low."

Joyce nodded, feeling too numb and overwhelmed to speak for the moment. She couldn't stop thinking about El going to the Ives. Yes they were her family, but Hopper had been too. And Joyce knew deep within her heart that despite how much they might love her, living in the Ives environment, having to be reminded of what happened to her mother every single day would not be good for El. They all wanted the best for her, because at the end of the day they *all* loved her.

"Well we best get back to the ward, I need to speak with the doctors anyway. A few of my colleagues will be joining us, to get the official story around," Owens explained as they reached the door.

"And what *is* the official story?"

"Teenagers at the mall out of hours, an explosion occurs in the food court from no fault of their own. The explosion causes the injuries of

the kids and the death of Mr Billy Hargrove. A fire breaks out which sadly...*Jim* is killed in..."

There was silence in the room as Joyce simply stared at Owens, taking in everything he had just said. She finally spoke, her throat sore. "Don't you ever get tired of lying?"

Sam let out a breath that could almost be a laugh if the situation was appropriate. But when he looked back at Joyce, there was empathy within his eyes.

"Every single day."

He cleared his throat and opened the door, hesitating as he turned to look at the emotionally wrecked woman who hadn't moved an inch. "Joyce?"

She blinked rapidly, trying to stop the tears that had gathered at her eyes. "Yeah?" she asked in a breathy voice as she dabbed at the wetness on her cheeks.

"You may want to change your clothes..."

Joyce looked down at her clothes, her eyes widening in surprise as she realised she was still in the Russian uniform. It appeared that *everyone* else hadn't noticed either. Or maybe it was because she was already known as being crazy. Maybe people wouldn't expect anything more from Joyce Byers. And with that thought in mind, she laughed. Truly *laughed* as she cried, nodding in agreement with Owens and taking the scrubs that he handed her from a laundry cupboard.

Oh it was going to be a long night.

Mike felt numb, his eyes glazed over as he stared out of the dark window and continued to comfort El as she cried in his arms. His heart had broken for her, he couldn't even begin to imagine the pain that she felt. *No one* deserved to go through this much pain, especially not El. She was all the good things in this crazy world, she made every single second worth living and yet life had a very cruel

way of treating her.

As he continued to stroke through her soft hair and brush his warm palm against her arm, Mike made a promise to himself, a promise he would never *ever* break. That after all of this was over, he was going to make El happy for the rest of her life. No matter what it took. He needed to see that smile again, the one that lit up her hazel eyes and showed off those adorable dimples that made his heart swoon.

He looked down at her, his own eyes red and sensitive as he took in his love. Her eyes were closed and she continued to cry, her whole beautiful face screwed up in pain. Tears ran down her cheeks making strands of her hair stick to her skin. Mike carefully pushed these back, tucking them behind her ear as he leaned down and pressed his lips to her forehead.

"I'm here," he whispered against her soft skin, feeling terrible that was the only comforting words he could give her. How could he possibly promise that everything was going to be okay right now? If Mike was certain of anything, it was that he wasn't going to lie to El *ever again*.

El's fingers clutched at his shirt, twisting the material now and again. It was as if she needed to know he was there in physical form. This wasn't the void, and despite the fact that everything felt like a nightmare, it wasn't a dream either.

There was a slight ruffling of the curtain and Mike lifted his head as he watched it being pushed across the railing by one of the nurses. She looked at Mike, surprised for a moment to see him there, before a small smile of amusement lifted her lips.

"Mr Wheeler," she scolded him, shaking her head slightly. "This is the second time I have found you here. You should be in your *own* bed, we're waiting for you to go for your CT scan."

Mike's arms tightened around El and he narrowed his eyes. "I'm not leaving my girlfriend. If you make me go back to my bed, then I'm just going to come right back here."

El raised her head slightly to look at the nurse, her face was starting

to get red and blotchy from her crying. Her hair was sticking out from the salty tears that had ran into the strands and her eyes were getting puffier by the moment.

The nurse sighed in sympathy looking between the couple. "I'm not here to take you away Mr Wheeler," she reached for something El and Mike couldn't see for a moment before she pushed it into sight. It was a wheelchair. "I'm here to collect Miss Hopper," she explained before giving El an encouraging smile. "We need to take you to the treatment room honey to get that leg cleaned and stitched."

El moaned in disagreement and looked up at her boyfriend, worry in her sorrowful eyes. Mike met her gaze and wanted desperately to refuse for her to go, but he knew that her leg *did* need to be seen by a medical professional.

He tried to clear the lump in his throat and exhaled a sigh. "El, you need to let them treat you, okay? I'll be right there with you." Mike looked up at the nurse quickly, his eyes beseeching her. "That *is* okay for me to come with her, right?"

Mike didn't like the uncertainty on the nurse's face. "Well - "

"He can go with her," came another voice, startling the nurse for a moment as Joyce rounded the curtain. Mike looked at her noticing she was now wearing blue scrubs. "I will be there too so it's not just a minor."

The nurse glanced between El, Mike and Joyce and eventually nodded, "alright." She pushed the wheelchair into the bay and seemed to relax. When she looked back at El her smile was more caring and less tense. "Right sweetheart, let's get you into this chair."

Mike and Joyce stood on either side of El as she lay on the bed in the treatment room, both of her supporters held one of her hands and looked down at her wound, trying to pretend it wasn't turning their stomachs.

"You're doing so great honey," Joyce said in that motherly tone that Mike had always liked. She had used that tone on him, especially after the events of 1983 when everyone but Mike and Hopper had

believed El was dead.

Hopper. What if he wasn't dead? If El could survive, then he could too right?

Mike knew he was probably in denial. This was a completely different situation, El had powers and Hopper didn't. Mike had always been kind of relieved about that considering his girlfriend could protect him from her crazy overprotective dad. But now...things were different and Mike knew it was only going to be a certain amount of time before it really hit him.

Mike was brought back to reality when the doctor sat on a low stool in front of El's leg began to speak. "I'm just going to give you the local anesthetic now. It's going to sting a little bit, but then you won't feel anymore pain. Is that alright Miss Hopper?"

"Y-Yes," El responded, her voice weak, her teeth chattering.

Mike tightened his grip on his girlfriend's hand, wishing he could do more for her, wishing he could ease more than just her physical pain.

She really was so strong, barely doing more than flinch when the doctor injected the anesthetic to certain areas around her large wound. She closed her eyes while the doctor began to stitch up the injury and kept them closed until the procedure was done.

Mike looked down at her wound, his stomach turning and bile scraping to the bottom of his throat. He *hated* that this had happened to her. He *hated* that he had been the one to cause this injury on her leg by ripping that piece of shit monster off her. But logic was still swirling around his brain, reminding him it could have been *much* worse if he hadn't. But still, seeing El like this was *painful*.

"Mike?"

He jumped, not even realising that tears had fallen down his cheeks. What made it worse was that El was looking at him, concern flashing in her eyes.

"Are you okay?"

Mike almost wanted to laugh. It was just like when the Shadow Monster had died and El had asked him if he was okay. She was selfless. So unbelievably selfless that it blew Mike's mind. He didn't think he could love her more and yet she would come out with questions like that. She put *everyone* before herself.

A smile flickered to Mike's dry lips and he nodded, leaning forward so he could press a grateful kiss to El's warm forehead. "Yes I'm fine. How...how are you?" He knew it was a stupid question but he couldn't help but ask. El of course merely shrugged, her attention going back to her wound that was now stitched in a neat line.

"See," Mike said, his voice slightly croaky. "I said you would have a bitchin' scar."

El looked back up at him, a grin appearing on her lips for just a moment. But it was a long enough moment to relieve Mike. She *was* going to be okay, it was just going to take time. And when she was better, when she was healing physically *and* emotionally Mike would tell her. He would tell her the words he longed to say, the words that were only meant for her but the whole party already knew.

He loved her.

El continued to look at her stitches as she was wheeled back to her hospital bed, Mike and Joyce trailing behind the nurse pushing her.

She wondered if her grief would be like this scar. Red, painful and uncomfortable, slowly seeping into healing but always there, even faintly. A permanent reminder of what she had suffered, what she had lost.

With difficulty she was helped back into bed by the nurse and Mike, Joyce overseeing but not interrupting the young man who was desperate to help. El looked at her boyfriend and felt her broken heart warm slightly. He was perfect and he had no idea. She hoped he wouldn't keep those important words from her for too long.

Joyce stepped in to help tuck El into the covers and Mike pulled a plastic chair as close to her bed as humanly possible. They both

reached for one another in sync, their fingers entwining and making El feel a little more whole.

Joyce stood by the end of the bed, uncomfortable on her feet and looking awkward. El frowned watching her, about to ask what was wrong before she spoke.

"El, do you want me to call your Aunt Becky? Do you want her to be here?"

Guilt immediately riddled at El's stomach as she thought about her Aunt. The last time she had seen her she had stolen from her purse and ran off to find Kali. Hop hadn't planned on keeping her away from Mama and Becky, it had been decided they would visit over the summer, when Owens and Hop had both felt it was safe for her to go to the Ives house. A place they were initially concerned might be watched by the wrong people. The bad men.

"Not tonight," El croaked, feeling even more guilty for not including her Aunt. There was too much going on and her head already felt like it was spinning. And who would watch Mama?

"Okay honey," Joyce responded in a soft voice, a reassuring smile on her face. "Whenever you're ready I'll contact her. If it's tomorrow or in a weeks time. Whatever you want."

"Thank you Joyce," El whispered, still feeling guilty.

"Of course honey."

El looked at Will's mom, someone she had always cared for and missed during the separation. But now as she stared at her, something seemed to worry her. "Where...where will I go? Without Hop. Where am I meant to go?" She didn't realise her lip was trembling and fresh tears were falling once more.

Joyce hurried forward to soothe El and Mike looked desperately between his girlfriend and Joyce, needing the same answer. The fear in his eyes was evident.

"El don't you worry about this, okay?" Joyce said fiercely, her own eyes watery. "We are *not* going to abandon you. You are going to be

looked after, you are not being taken *anywhere* against your will. We love you. We *all* do."

El didn't notice the way Mike's cheeks blushed at Joyce's final words. Instead she breathed out a shaky breath of relief and reached for the kind woman, needing a mother's comfort in that moment. Mike let her hand go, understanding this but staying close.

"Miss Hopper?"

The voice of the nurse broke the embrace and El looked towards the woman, it was the same nurse from earlier, but this time she was holding a hospital gown in her hands. Mercifully it was not the same design of the one El had worn at the lab, but it still made her flinch, flashes of her past rushing through her mind.

"We just need to get you changed into this gown, you're going down for your scan soon."

El nodded feeling tense as she looked between Joyce and her boyfriend. Mike's cheeks were slightly red and he stood up, looking uncomfortable. His eyes flashed between El and the nurse and she knew this wasn't a moment where he was allowed to stay.

"I'll um, be in the corridor if you need me," Mike said to El, leaning forward to kiss her cheek. She would have giggled at how red his face was if it was under different circumstances.

El watched Mike leave, smiling slightly to herself when he stumbled by the curtain and almost got himself caught up in it. He gave her a shy grin of embarrassment and hurried away. She stared at the spot where he had just been and sighed, allowing a warmth to fill her chest.

She loved that boy.

Mike could feel his head pounding as he walked through the ward and towards the corridor. He past his friends, not really knowing if they tried speaking to him or not. He couldn't hear anything through the pulse that rapidly echoed in his ears. He gasped a breath of relief

when he reached the quiet corridor and sank down onto one of the chairs that were against the wall. He lowered his head into his warm hands and closed his eyes, taking a few deep breaths.

Now that he wasn't at El's side he didn't feel like he needed to pretend to be strong. Because he wasn't. He was scared. *Terrified* of where El might have to go now, angry at Hopper for putting her in this situation and upset. Upset because he *had* cared for that lying, piece of shit Chief. Damnit. Jim Hopper was a good guy and had been an excellent father to El, stepping up into a role he had been robbed of. And now El had been robbed of *him*.

His palms were suddenly wet as tears rushed down his cheeks. He shuddered, trying to keep his breathing normal but failing as he started to *really* cry. Cry for Hopper, cry for El and cry for himself.

He remembered all the times he had been mean or disrespectful to the Chief. God he wished he hadn't acted that way. Yes his emotions the night he was reunited with El were warranted, Hopper had kept them apart after all. But all those times when Mike knew he was pushing Hopper's boundaries? He had acted out of spite, because he was still hurt that the Chief had seen his agony over those 353 days and *still* hadn't been honest. Still hadn't told him that El was *alive*.

But now he just felt hollow. Mike remembered the way Hopper had hugged him that night he had broken down into tears. It was the most fierce and protective hug Mike had ever experienced.

"I'm sorry kid."

That is what he had said all those months ago.

"I'm sorry too," Mike whispered into his hands, shaking from his emotion and wishing more than *anything* that things could be different. That El was happy right now, that Hop was here. But how could he even try and hope for that. It wasn't possible, and this was the new reality.

"Michael?"

Mike lifted his head from his cupped hands and turned his tear

stained face towards the sound of his mother's voice. He found her quickly, she stood by the nurses station with his dad, both of them looking strained and worried.

Relief seemed to flicker over both of their faces and Karen Wheeler let out a sob as she rushed to her son.

"Oh *Michael!* What's happened?"

She engulfed him in her arms and for once Mike didn't fight it. He couldn't stop the tears, now they were flowing they didn't seem to want to go.

His mother immediately went into a panic, her hands moving from his head and brushing away his tears in a manic type of way. "What happened? How did you hurt your head? Where is Nancy? I'm sorry we are only here now, we were at the fair. We only just got the message and then we had to ask one of the neighbours to look after Holly. We've heard all sorts of rumours on the way here - "

"Is it true the Chief of Police is dead son?" Ted interrupted, awkwardly patting Mike on the back in what he assumed was a soothing gesture.

"Maybe I can answer some of those questions for you."

Karen pulled back enough for her son to see who had spoken. It was Sam Owens and he was looking anxiously between Mike and his parents, like he was worried that Mike would say the wrong thing.

Sam looked between Karen and Ted holding out his hand to shake, "I'm Dr Sam Owens, I'm in charge of the care of the kids sent here tonight. I have spoken to the police so maybe I can be of some assistance."

Karen looked hesitantly between her son and Owens, clearly not wanting to leave him but also wanting to understand what had happened that night.

"It's okay," Mike assured her, clearing his sore throat and wiping his eyes quickly. "I want to get back to bed anyway."

Karen frowned and bit her lower lip in worry, looking at her son before finally sighing. "Okay honey, but we will be right with you and Nancy okay? We'll just speak with Dr Owens first."

Mike nodded, feeling numb all over again as he headed back into the ward, hurrying to wipe his face so El wouldn't notice he had been crying. The last thing he wanted was for her to worry about him. He wanted to be there for *her*, not the other way around.

He walked up to her bed, thankful to see the curtain had been pulled back and that she was back in bed, this time with a hospital gown on. Mike grimaced slightly seeing her like that. El had told him how she didn't really have actual clothes at the lab, especially at the end when they were testing her powers so much that she was constantly kept in a hospital gown.

Mike picked up his pace wanting to be back by her side. He paused slightly when he got closer and realised Joyce was still with her, holding her hand and sitting in the seat Mike had vacated. He watched them for a moment, glad that El had someone, a mother figure to take care of her. It was the only comfort he could find right now.

The women noticed Mike immediately and Joyce ushered him forward with a gentle smile. "Here you go sweetie, you sit here with El." She stood up from the chair and offered it to a thankful Mike.

He gave her a grateful smile and sat back down, reaching for El's hand and instantly feeling more relaxed now that he was back by her side.

"Hi," he whispered to her, leaning forward so he could rest his arm on her bed and stroke her hair. She stared at him, her eyes were red and sore but there was still that beautiful light within them. It hadn't been diminished tonight but it wasn't as bright as normal.

"Hi," she breathed back, a small smile curving her lips for a moment. Mike watched as El's gaze danced over his face, her eyes narrowing and her lips frowning slightly. "Are you okay?"

Mike smiled, knowing that she saw right through him. He knew he

couldn't lie to her but didn't want her to worry either. He reached for her hand and squeezed it gently.

"I am now."

The next few hours seemed to fly by. El was sent down for her scan, which caused anxiety for not only her but Mike too, worrying about her on her own. But 40 minutes later she was wheeled back, looking relieved, especially after the doctor advised that her leg wasn't broken. He seemed flummoxed as to how she could have sustained such an injury from supposed shrapnel.

Then Mike was given his hospital gown which almost caused an argument with Karen when she wanted to make sure he had tied the back properly.

"I can do it myself," he muttered in embarrassment to his mom.

His cheeks only getting redder when Dustin sniggered, "dude, let your mom help you. You can totally see your boxers."

Mike grabbed the back of the gown and backed up into his cubicle again, rolling his eyes when Will, Dustin and Lucas grinned. He avoided El's gaze completely.

He was given a reprieve when he got to sit in peace with El while his parents went to Nancy, now her turn to get the mothering experience. Mike stayed with his girlfriend until he was forced to go down for his CT scan, initially declining because he didn't want to leave El again, but after being faced with his mother, father, sister and girlfriend insisting he *must* go, he finally gave in and allowed himself to be wheeled down to the scanning department, looking back at El until he finally rounded the corridor.

She was going to be okay. She had to be.

It was much later now El thought to herself as she opened her bleary eyes, looking out at the window next to her, the only lights she could see were industrial ones, meant to be kept on to light up the hospital.

She turned to her side, rustling the sheets as she narrowed her eyes,

trying to see in the dark to the bed next to her. El could make out Mike's frame and the gentle snores he was making as he slept.

Dustin, Lucas, Will, Erica, Robin and Nancy had been discharged from the hospital after all of their checks were cleared. Only El, Mike, Steve, Jonathan and Max had had to stay.

Max.

El shuffled around in her bed once more, trying not to anger the stitches on her leg as she propped herself up on her elbows and tried looking ahead to the bed opposite her. It didn't take El long to realise that Max was crying, and it had been that noise which had woken her up.

Her heart felt heavy seeing her best friend like this, especially because El knew exactly how she was feeling.

It only took a second for El to make a decision before she was flinging the sheet off her body and slowly moving herself to the edge of her bed. She reached with some effort for the crutches the nurses had given her earlier that evening and pushed her arms through the supports, gripping her hands onto the holders.

It was more of an effort than she would have liked to get herself out of bed and steady her balance with the crutches. The skin around the stitches was sewn tight and didn't enjoy the exertion she was taking her body on. But El merely took a deep breath and carried on towards Max, hobbling as best as she could.

"Max?" El whispered once she was close enough to the hospital bed.

Her best friend startled and looked up immediately, her blue eyes swimming with tears. "El?" she asked in a croaky voice full of confusion. She looked at her for a moment and then gasped, "El what are you doing out of bed? Your leg - "

"I make my own rules," El cut in, making Max stop abruptly as the girls looked at one another, a smile appearing on their lips. The redhead gave in and shuffled herself towards one side of the bed, leaving room for El.

She got on the bed with a helping hand from Max and then collapsed back against the pillow, trying to steady her uneven breathing.

"I could have come to you," Max said looking at El with concern, her face just as blotchy as her best friend's.

"I heard you crying," El explained, looking at Max, her brow creasing.
"About Billy?"

Max lowered her head, almost ashamed as she slowly nodded. "Y-yeah..."

El reached for her hand, squeezing it gently in understanding. "It's okay."

"It's *not* okay," Max cried as she wiped foolishly at her tears. "He did h-horrible things El. He hurt others, me, *you*. I...I know I shouldn't be grieving him. But he...he - "

"Was your brother," El answered, watching Max with sadness filling her hazel eyes.

"Y-Yeah. I *know* he doesn't deserve it after everything he did."

"He was controlled by the Shadow Monster Max."

Max laughed gently and shook her head, tears dripping onto the sheets. She swallowed the lump in her throat and looked at her best friend. "He was a bad person before the Shadow Monster El."

There was silence for a moment, Max sniffling as she wiped her tears with the edge of her pyjama sleeve while El stared out of the window at the warm glow of a light in the darkness.

"There was good in him," she finally stated surprising Max. El turned to look at her best friend, tightening her squeeze on her hand. "I saw."

"When you were in the void?" Max asked, her blue eyes wide and assertive, wanting to *know*, wanting the gaps to be filled.

El nodded and sighed heavily, reminding herself of what she had

seen, of what she had told Billy. "His father was *bad*. Bad to him, always shouting and hitting him and his mama. She...she was very pretty and...and left him. His father had hurt her too. But what she did to Billy was worse. She *left* him and he loved her. He missed her so much and he felt lost. He had a lot of anger."

Max seemed startled as she accepted everything El said without hesitation. Fresh tears swirled down her freckled cheeks and she nodded, sniffing through a blocked nose. Nothing more needed to be said because Max knew that El understood. She didn't want her best friend to hide her tears or her emotions. The girls moved closer, their hair tangling together on the pillow as they continued to hold hands and stare at the ceiling.

"Nothing is going to be the same again," Max whispered, her voice croaky and tired.

El continued to stare at the ceiling, long after Max had fallen asleep. She slowly blinked, her eyes becoming heavy once more. Her best friend's words whirled around her mind, again and again and she inhaled a deep breath, exhaling through her nose trying to steady herself. Things *weren't* going to be the same.

And when tomorrow came, it would be a new day. A new start that El hadn't wanted, nor was she ready for. Time to find a new home.

AN: Well that was a rollercoaster of emotions for me when writing this! But with the way Season 3 ended I had to get my thoughts into a story and I hope you liked this first chapter. Please let me know!

2. Goodbye Chief

The Long Road Home

AN: Hi everyone! I'm back! And this time my excuse isn't work! A few weeks ago I was experiencing severe migraines and dizziness. I was told to go to hospital and it was discovered that I had too much fluid surrounding my brain. I had a spinal and brain surgery and I have spent the last few weeks recovering. So writing has been the last thing on my mind for quite some time.

But I am back to work tomorrow and I have been working on this for a while and wanted to get it out to you all. Thank you so much for being so patient, and if you are reading this thank you so much for sticking around this long! I am sorry I have made you wait, but my health has to come first in my life. Better you get a chapter late, then never I guess! I hope you enjoy this one.

Love to you all and please let me know what you think!

Chapter 2 - Goodbye Chief

It was the sound of whistling that stirred El from her sleep as she turned on her side, moaning in disdain for the early morning and wrapping her blanket more tightly around herself. She tried to duck her head under the covers, shielding herself from the warm beams of sun that crept through the thin drapes of her window.

It was too early. So why was Hop singing? Mornings before he went to work would usually consist of him stumbling out of bed, a curse word here or there when he stubbed his toe every time against the side of the couch and then the sound of the radio, a low hum that was oddly comforting.

This time he was singing quietly to himself, those songs he liked by Jim Croce. And instead of burying herself further into her warm and comfortable bed, El propped herself up by her elbows and narrowed her eyes, watching as her bedroom door swung open.

Hopper was stood by the kitchen counter but turned at the noise, smiling

*when he saw El. "Good morning," he said in that rumble of a voice. Back in 1983 that voice had intimidated El, but now it was **warm**, comforting and familiar.*

"Good morning," El repeated, her lips twitching into a smile despite her confusion. She watched Hop turn back to the counter and her brow creased. "What are you doing?"

The Chief laughed, turning back around once more, but this time with a plated Eggo Extravaganza in his firm grip. El's eyebrows immediately lifted in delight and she practically beamed as she shuffled further up the headboard and Hop walked in with her favourite meal.

El stretched her arms out, her hands open and ready to receive the Eggos. The Chief grinned, amusement and adoration playing in his eyes as he obediently handed over the waffles. He watched as El tucked into the treat, her face a picture of happiness as he sat down on the edge of the bed, sinking into the mattress slightly.

After a while El noticed Hopper's fond expression and frowned, "why do you stare?" she asked, mumbling slightly as she chewed on her Eggo.

"Don't talk with your mouth full remember," he responded teasingly, making El smirk slightly as she continued to eat, but kept her gaze on the Chief waiting for his response.

His playful smile softened slightly and he took a deep breath, hesitance capturing his words for a moment.

El frowned, nerves entering her stomach. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," Hopper assured her quickly, El's words seemed to have cut through his own nerves as he looked at his daughter. His smile flickered back to life and he sighed, "in fact, we're celebrating."

"Celebrating?" El asked in confusion, putting down her fork.

"Uh huh," Hopper grinned, nodding his head. "I spoke to Sam last night, he's been keeping an eye on all activity around Hawkins. And seeing as things have been calm for quite some time now, there hasn't been any unwanted eyes looking at this place. So - "

"So?!"

"Sam says you can go out El. I mean not in large crowds of course, but you can go outside. You can go to your friends' houses,"

"Even Mike's?" El's heart was in her throat, her hands felt clammy as she stared at Hopper with wide eyes. Was this really happening?

Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose, shaking his head in disapproval as his shoulders lowered. "Yes," he said in a pained voice. "Even Wheeler's..."

"I have to tell Mike," El muttered to herself in a mad rush, instantly moving the plate off her lap as she searched through her blankets for her super com, a present the party had given her for Christmas.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Hopper interrupted, pushing his palm out in a stop motion. El huffed and looked at him, practically bouncing with impatience to tell her boyfriend the news they had been longing for, for almost 6 months now.

"There are going to be some rules - "

"Rules are stupid," El whined as she gave up the search for the radio and reached for her plate again, already feeling like the independence she longed for wasn't what Hopper was about to give her.

"No they are not stupid," the Chief replied, shaking his head as he tried to be stern but was unable to keep the smile off his face. "I'm talking rules that **any** teenager would have...well with a few exceptions."

El slowly lifted her gaze up from her plate, chewing on her Eggo as she nodded cautiously, waiting for Hop to go on.

"Number 1, you will be allowed out, only if you let me know where you are going. If I'm out at the office, you can ring Flo. You know how she loves to speak with you. Number 2, yes you can go to the Wheeler house, but only if there is someone else there. And **no** I don't just mean **Mike!** You two aren't allowed to be alone in that house, or **this** house without an adult or one of your little friends present."

El huffed, "I don't understand why Mike and I - "

"Number 3! I want you home before 9pm. And number 4, I want you to try and avoid large crowds, okay? I want your friends to be able to see you at all times."

"What if I need to go to the bathroom?"

Hopper coughed uncomfortably, looking down at his feet. "Yeah, um, no your friends don't need to go with you there. Unless you want Max to go to the bathroom with you, but you go in the cubicle by yourself."

El merely nodded, not sure that Hopper understood that her and Max weren't particularly close. They had barely interacted, El staying firmly at Mike's side at all times. She wondered if in time her relationship with Max would change, like those girls she saw on her soap operas. But why would she want to hang out with anyone but Mike? Mike kissed her and made her feel things, things she had only seen on her favourite shows when the couples would kiss and then say that word, **love**.

"So," Hopper said briskly, a smile curving on his mouth. "Do we have a compromise?"

El pursed her lips for a moment before she eventually gave in, allowing the thrill of being able to leave the cabin and be **normal** fill her body with excitement. She nodded, a beautiful smile blossoming on her face and reaching her eyes, which sparkled with possibility.

"Halfway happy."

Hopper laughed, shaking his head in amusement as he leaned forward, ruffling El's hair with his large hand as she protested and tried to move away. **"Halfway happy,"** he said, grinning.

6th July 1985

El opened her tired eyes and stared up at the ceiling, expecting to see wood timber but instead finding a white painted pattern. It was like a heavy stone dropped to the bottom of her stomach as for the second morning waking up without Hop, she had to admit it wasn't just a bad dream.

This had been her first night spent at the Byers house, having only

been discharged from hospital late yesterday evening. And while Joyce, Jonathan and Will were being as welcoming as they could, it just wasn't *comfortable* yet. It wasn't Hopper singing in the morning, it wasn't his curse words, it wasn't the smell of Eggos, it wasn't the stench of cigarettes that he smoked. It wasn't *home* without him.

El could feel her eyes water as the tears gathered at the corners and slowly dropped down the edge of her cheeks. She sniffled as she wiped at them, trying to be brave, knowing that loss wasn't something that was new to her, but losing Hopper seemed to hurt the most. He had given her the family she had deserved and El had loved that, she had loved *him*.

There was a distant knock that distracted El's mind for a moment as her tired eyes trailed to the closed bedroom door and her ears twitched as she tried to listen. Another knock followed and she realised it was the front door.

She stayed still as she heard Joyce moving from her bedroom, her bare feet padding against the worn carpet as she hurried to find out who was calling so early. There was the scrapping of the lock before the stiff door was pulled open.

El's brow creased as she tried to concentrate on listening, wanting anything to distract her from the complex emotions that whirled around her mind like smoke.

"Um, hi Mrs Byers. I know it's early..."

El immediately sat up, yanking the covers off her warm body. She was wearing a pair of Joyce's pajama pants and a baggy t-shirt that belonged to the boy who had just arrived.

"Mike honey, she's still sleeping - "

"No I'm not," El replied, feeling slightly breathless as she made her presence known, stumbling down the corridor and turning the corner to see Mike and Joyce stood in the doorway. They both turned to look at her, Joyce's eyes were red and she looked exhausted.

Mike's eyes held a similar weariness, like he had tossed and turned all

night. But there was that smile, that *smile* that just made El melt. Even at moments like this. It was relief and happiness all in one smile. She couldn't help but give him one back, it may not have been in full force, but she couldn't deny that it was still there. Mike made *everything* better.

"Good morning sweetheart," Joyce said softly, her voice slightly croaky as she reached El, gently brushing her hair out of her face. "How did you sleep?"

El merely shrugged, not really knowing how to answer. What would be the best term for being awake most of the night? Replaying everything that had happened.

Joyce accepted her answer, giving her a small smile, her eyes filled with sadness as she nodded, completely understanding El's thought process. "I'll make us some breakfast," she concluded, giving El's cheek an affection hold for a moment before moving into the kitchen. "Come in Mike," she called.

"Thank you Mrs Byers," Mike responded, hurrying over the threshold and closing the door behind him. He turned back to El, looking jumpy, his eyes wide as he stared at her.

"Hi."

"Hi," El responded, her fingers nervously playing with the edge of her shirt. Well, *Mike's* shirt.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked, before cringing and running a hand anxiously through his hair. "I'm sorry that was totally the *wrong* thing to say. Of course you're not okay. I mean how *could* you be okay. Considering everything that's happened and, oh crap, why am I bringing it all up? El, I'm sorry I - "

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Too much talking."

"R-Right," Mike said, clearing his throat and stuffing his hands into

his shorts pockets.

There was an awkward silence for a moment, Mike kept his eyes low while El hesitantly looked out of the window, wondering why things had become so strange between her and Mike. She knew she had dumped his ass, but was there rules to how they were meant to act with one another? Or was it simply because of losing Hop? Did he just not know what to say?

"Hey guys," came a tired voice, making El and Mike turn to see Will making his way down the corridor, his bare feet pressing into the carpet and his hair a mess, like he too had tossed and turned all night.

"Hey Will," Mike and El said in unison, catching one another's eyes at their synchronicity, and blushing slightly as they looked back to their cleric.

"Did you sleep okay?" Mike asked his best friend.

Will shrugged as he walked over, "alright I guess. Just trying to get used to Jonathan's room."

"I'm sorry," El muttered, dipping her head in guilt and grasping her hands together. Joyce had decided that her boys were to share a bedroom for now while El took Will's room, which was smaller than Jonathan's. She wasn't too sure how Will felt about that arrangement.

"It's fine," he insisted, only meeting El's gaze for a moment before looking away. "You guys wanna go watch cartoons until breakfast is ready?"

"Yeah sure," Mike spoke up, taking a tentative step towards El. "We'll be there in a minute."

Will nodded in acceptance, used to Mike and El having moments alone by now. He wandered to the kitchen to make sure Joyce knew he was awake.

El watched Will go and frowned slightly, feeling like a burden on the family. She had taken Will's room, his space. And now his mom was looking after her. Did he feel left out? El felt like she had a bond with

Lucas and Dustin from the early days, and recently her and Max had become close. But Will? She had always thought they *would* be close because of their connection to the Upside Down. However that only seemed to create more of a distance between them. Did Will blame her for everything that had happened to him? El felt like it *was* her fault. The gate never would have been opened without her. Will wouldn't have been taken to the Upside Down, Benny, Barb and the man that the boys had told her about, *Bob* would still be here. And Hop...the ache in her heart felt even heavier as she tried to swallow the lump in her throat.

"Hey," Mike's voice called to El softly, bringing her out of the depths of guilt and sadness and back into the present. Her hazel eyes found the dark amber orbs immediately, his gentle but steady gaze keeping her grounded.

"Don't worry about Will, he's just got to get used to you living here," he said with a kind and reassuring smile. Mike let out a slight laugh, "it's not like I've given him the opportunity to hang out with you much..."

"Not just you," El reasoned, a small smile twitching her lips. "I liked us staying at the cabin too." *I wish we were back there now. That nothing had happened.*

Mike's thin and pale cheeks started to deepen in colour and his eyes dropped to the floor as he nodded. El tried not to smile, but his nervousness was cute. It filled her cold chest with warmth and a wholeness that she was desperately missing.

She remembered the words she had heard him speak that day in the cabin and her heart began to race. Her palms warmed and her breathing became sharper as she tried to think of how to approach the situation. To make him say those words again. The words that El felt too.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I - "

"Breakfast is ready kids!" Joyce called, her voice breaking through El's spur of the moment thoughts, which quickly snapped back to reality.

"El?" Mike questioned, his eyes searching her face, *knowing* that what she was about to say was going to be important. But to Mike *everything* El said was important.

"We should eat breakfast," she told him instead, a slight smile on her lips as she started to walk towards the kitchen. Mike was stood on the same spot for a moment, his handsome face a flurry of emotions as he tried to process what had just happened. The truth was nothing *had* happened, and yet the ghost of what *could* have been said was left behind, trapped in the electricity between the young couple.

El picked at her scrambled eggs, her chin cupped in her palm as she watched the way her fork swirled around her plate, making the fluffy eggs smear through the butter of the toasted bread. Now and again she would take a bite and while there was nothing wrong with the food, it just didn't taste *right*. It was different, a change that she hadn't been ready for.

There were murmured voices around her, short and desperate conversations about television, the weather and food as Joyce, Jonathan, Will and Mike tried to keep the atmosphere calm and normal. But what *was* normal now?

El was almost relieved when a knock at the front door stopped the meaningless conversation as Jonathan stood up before Joyce could even push away from the table. He looked nervously between his mom and the front of the house.

"I'll get it mom."

"Don't be silly Jonathan," Joyce said with a weary smile as she stood up and reached for her son's cheek. "If you're finished eating, go get some rest sweetheart."

Jonathan sighed and nodded in defeat watching his mom go. He was having to wear a back brace while his bones and bruises healed and could only limp around the house, usually accompanied by Nancy

who had taken it upon herself to be his full time carer now that the Hawkins Post remained closed, leaving Jonathan and Nancy without jobs. Or maybe she did it because she loved him. El knew she would do the same for Mike.

Her gaze trailed over to him, her eyes lingering on the healing stitched cut to his forehead. El's brow creased in a frown, the memory of how he sustained that injury playing through her mind. The terror she had felt when Mike lunged forward for the possessed Billy, trying to stop him from harming El. He had been so brave even when they had both known it would be a fight that he couldn't win.

"Who do you think it is?" Will whispered to Mike, El and Jonathan. But before any of them could answer with their assumptions they heard the voice of Dr Owens, speaking in a grave voice.

"Hi Joyce, how are you bearing up?"

"As good as I can be," Joyce answered, her voice tired and strained as they heard the door squeak closed as she stepped onto the porch with Owens, now muffling the rest of their conversation from the group.

Jonathan and Will looked at one another, an unspoken request to eavesdrop passing between them as they moved out of the kitchen and hurried towards the front of the house.

El didn't feel the same need to listen in to what Owens had to say because she could hazard a guess. It would be about Hop and who was now responsible for El. She knew she had a family, but her heart had always felt like it belonged here, in Hawkins.

"You have barely touched your eggs," Mike suddenly blurted out, making El startle as she looked up at him and realised they were alone once again. Her cheeks warmed and she shrugged slightly, her gaze dipping to her plate.

"I'm not that hungry."

"I could make you some Eggo's?"

El's head immediately snapped back up and she caught Mike's hopeful eyes and felt a smile lifting her lips. She nodded, her eyes

sparkling with gratitude.

"Okay," Mike said breathlessly as he rose from his chair, a determination becoming fixed on his face as he headed to the fridge and looked through the small freezer, routing around until he found a box of El's favourite food.

"Here we go," he said with a relieved grin, taking a couple of the frozen waffles out of the package and slotting them into the toaster. He pressed it down and then turned around, his back facing the counter as he looked at El, a shy smile playing on his lips. "I remember the first time I made you these."

"Me too," El grinned, her heart racing, her breath coming out in a shaky exhale.

"I didn't realise how addicted you'd become though," he teased, a glint in his amber eyes.

El smirked, the air feeling light and happy around her. "I'm not *addicted*. They are the best food."

"Not better than my mom's meatloaf."

"An Eggo Extravaganza is better," El retorted.

Mike opened his mouth to answer back and dispute El's claim, when instead his eyebrows raised in surprise and his eyes widened as an idea came to him. "I can make you an Eggo Extravaganza!"

El's smile slipped off her face and that feeling of a stone falling to the bottom of her stomach was back. "Mike..."

"I'm sure Joyce has candy around here," Mike chuckled, a brightness to his voice as he checked the cupboards. "She won't mind us using some."

"Mike - "

"I'm sure she's got cream in here," Mike said to himself as he rifled through the fridge. The smell of the Eggos heating and cooking filling the air.

"Mike..."

El's heart was racing, she could feel the pounding of her pulse in her ears as her chest grew tighter. Her breath came out sharper as she watched Mike talking happily to himself as he gathered the ingredients. The ache in her heart opened, her lip trembled and the wetness of tears filled her eyes before she could even think, spilling down her cheeks.

Her eyes watched as the multi colored candies fell onto the now steamy waffles, almost in slow motion. The noise around her was murmured, Mike's voice a blur as all she could hear was her heart beat, louder and louder.

"Stop."

"Light cream?" Mike shuddered looking at the squirty cream he had just taken out of the fridge. "Why would you want *light* cream - "

"STOP!"

Mike startled, dropping the canister of cream which rolled under the table as he turned in shock to look at El. She was shaking, her face wet with tears and her eyes heartbroken.

"Eggo Extravaganza," El whispered through a dry throat. "Is H-Hops."

"El - " Mike choked out, his eyes mortified as he realised his mistake.
"El I'm so - "

But El didn't hear another thing, she needed air. She went to open the backdoor with her mind, her frustration at her powers not working making an exhausted cry rip from her chest as she slammed the door open with her clammy hand and rushed outside.

"SHIT," Mike groaned running his hands harshly through his hair, tight enough to be painful as he left his half created Eggo Extravaganza behind and hurried through the back door, ignoring the calls from Will asking what had happened.

He stumbled down the steps, grasping for the wooden banister to

steady himself as he searched the back yard for El, feeling sick with guilt. He had only meant to cheer her up, thinking that her favourite meal could be the trick. But of course it wasn't. *Of course* it would make her think of Hopper.

"Nice one Wheeler," Mike muttered to himself, his voice filled with self loathing as he huffed and walked down the remaining steps, searching the edge of the woods for his girlfriend. Shit, was he even allowed to call her that now? They were just taking a break...*right*!?

"Not now that you've screwed it up," he said bitterly, wanting to kick himself for being so damn stupid.

"El?" Mike called walking to the edge of the tree line, his eyes narrowing as he tried to look through the leafy brambles of Mirkwood. He knew she couldn't have gone too far, she could barely walk right now without her crutches. Not knowing where she had gone brought forward a dark anxiety that Mike hadn't felt for about seven months. "Please, just tell me where you are. I *can't*..I can't lose you..."

The sound of quiet sniffling reached Mike's ears and he hurried forward to where he felt he was being pulled. "El?" he asked again, his voice quieter, *softer*.

"Mike?"

Mike whirled around and found her, immediately exhaling out a breath, feeling dizzy with relief. She was sitting at the bottom of a tree, her knees pushed up to her chest and her arms wrapped around her legs. She slowly lifted her head and Mike instantly felt shame build in the pit of his stomach at her beautiful tear stained face.

"El I'm so sorry," he hurried to say, collapsing onto his knees in front of her.

She shook her head, closing her eyes as she wiped at the corners with the back of her hand. "No, I am sorry."

Mike exhaled a breath of laughter in shock. "What have *you* got to be sorry for El? You haven't done *anything* wrong. It was all me and I am

"so sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"I shouldn't have got upset."

Mike shook his head, his jaw tight with defiance. "No El, you had every right to get upset. It's my fault. I just wanted...I wanted to make you feel better and I screwed up. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," El said quietly, looking up at Mike and giving him a weak smile. "I know you wanted to help. Eggo Extravaganza...it's Hop."

"I know," Mike sighed, hesitantly moving closer to El and lowering himself to the ground next to her. He shuffled himself backwards so that his back was also against the vast tree trunk, he could feel the layered bark against the back of his shirt and the broken leaves on the forest floor brush against his bare legs.

For a moment there was silence as they stared ahead of them where they could just make out the Byers house through low hanging branches and leafy terrain. There was peace in the forest, the occasional bird song and ruffling of feathers as the summer breeze passed across their skin in a gentle caress. It could have been beautiful, but Mike knew that there was so much darkness to these woods.

"Why did you come sit here?" he asked, keeping his eyes on the green leaves moving in the breeze.

"I couldn't levitate into the tree...so I sat."

Mike turned his head to look at El, concern creasing his brow. "They will come back soon. Your powers I mean. You just need to...rest."

"Recharge my batteries." El nodded, her expression solemn as she looked down at the forest floor.

"Exactly," Mike said trying to be as upbeat as possible. He had always feared El would exhaust herself and something like this would happen. His eyes slowly moved their gaze up to El's head, now covered by beautiful curls. Mike bit his lip, worrying it beneath his teeth, wondering *what* was going on in that amazing head of hers.

Had all the overexertion done something to her? Would she be okay one minute and then collapse the next? Just like she had in the Starcourt Mall? Mike felt goosebumps rise up his arms at the thought and he quickly cleared his throat, not wanting to even *think* about El being in any kind of danger. It made him feel nauseous and for his chest to feel like it was caving in. There couldn't be a world without El. She was the earth, the sun and the moon all in one.

And Mike didn't care if people thought he was too overprotective of her. He would protect her with his last breath, he would do anything for her. *Anything* that would keep her safe and well. Because it was in the racing of his heart when she was around, it was in the electricity he felt when their skin brushed together or the eruption of butterflies in his stomach when they kissed. He *loved* her. And there was no limits with love.

Joyce closed the front door firmly behind her and ushered Dr Owens towards the porch swing. He looked at the rickety wooden seat with skepticism but merely shrugged before sitting down.

Joyce joined him, taking a deep breath as she turned to look at Owens, her chocolate brown eyes wide and curious. "Is there any word?"

The doctor sighed, shaking his head. "No...I'm afraid there isn't. In fact...Joyce that's why I'm here..." Owens moved a hand to the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a folded up piece of paper. He hesitantly passed it to Joyce and watched as she hurried to unravel it.

"Jim Hopper is being declared legally dead Joyce."

Her fingers froze on the paper, her eyes wet as she stared down at the official document, barely able to see through the fog that filled her gaze. She didn't notice that she was shaking, but she could feel the pain in her heart. It was getting harder and harder to hide away from the agony.

Joyce squeezed her eyes closed, allowing the tears that gathered to fall sharply down her thin face. "I closed my eyes for a second," she whispered, her breath shaky and heavy with grief. "And then he was

gone."

"You did what you had to do Joyce," Owens said sympathetically. He looked tired as he leaned forward slightly, looking ahead towards the undergrowth that surrounded the property.

"You know that's what Jim would have wanted you to do. To close the gate, to protect the girl."

Joyce winced as the last memory she had of Hopper came to the forefront of her mind. That outfit, that *stupid* mustache, those tearfilled blue eyes accepting his fate and that smile of understanding. The smile that said he wanted her to close the gate, he wanted her to protect El, to protect them *all*.

This thought resounded through Joyce's head as she took a sharp intake of air, trying to calm herself as she sat back, wiping at her eyes. "What do you need me to do?"

Owens reached for his briefcase, pulling out a large pile of official looking documents. He turned back to Joyce, meeting her gaze. She knew what these papers were. She had already signed a set in 1983 and 1984. It seemed 1985 would be no different.

"I need you to gather all of those kids here. All of them that were involved. I'll be back tonight and we will get these confidentiality papers signed. And your settlement papers. We have named you as the guardian for the minors, and their settlement money will be in trust until they turn 18."

Joyce nodded, feeling numb as her head pounded, trying to take in all of this new information.

"And Joyce? May I suggest something? For when you have your settlement?"

"Yes..."

Owens looked around at the area, his eyes scanning the trees, undergrowth and the house. "Leave this place. It's only been getting more and more attention in the media. You know it isn't going to be long before the wrong people are looking at it too..."

Joyce tightened her jaw as she nodded, blinking away the tears as she looked around the land of the home that had been her own since before Jonathan was born. It had felt so easy to leave after losing Bob, but after everything had changed this summer...could she really take the kids away from their friends?

If it's for their safety...yes.

7th July 1985

Rain splattered on the window as El sat cross legged in the middle of Will's floor, rooting through her duffel bag of clothes.

"Meant to be summer," she muttered darkly to herself as the rain continued to pour, the thick dark clouds casting shadows in the bedroom.

It was another day at the Byers house. It didn't feel like it had been three days without Hop and yet it felt like it had been a lifetime since she heard his loud and somewhat annoying singing, the way he huffed and groaned anytime Mike knocked on the front door, or how El cringed at the shirts he had taken to wearing. Now she would give anything to hear that voice or roll her eyes while he insisted that his shirts were "*cutting edge!*"

There was a gentle knock at the bedroom door and El looked up to see Joyce hovering, a kind smile on her face and a softness in her eyes that always seemed to have such a calming effect.

"Hi sweetie," Joyce said as her chocolate brown eyes gazed down at El's bag. She sighed quietly and slowly looked back up at the teenage girl. "Please tell me if this is too soon...but I was thinking we could go to the cabin today. Get some more of your stuff and...and Hops..."

El's face fell as she looked down at her clothes, having barely anything new to change into. The majority of her things were still at the cabin and while she wasn't sure if going there was something she could face, she knew it had to be done.

She nodded slowly, looking up at Joyce, her eyes wide and

beseeching as she thought of something. "Can my friends come too?"

Joyce looked surprised for a moment but then her lips stretched into an understanding smile. "Of course sweetie. I'll call around now for you, see who is free..." A playful glint entered Joyce's eyes, and before she could stop herself she added, "although I'm sure Mike will be free no matter what."

El blushed, she couldn't help the pink tinge that rose to her cheeks as she ducked her head and tried to contain a smile. She couldn't stop the way she felt about him, no matter what was happening. He had her heart.

El was thankful Joyce didn't say anymore on the matter and watched her go to make the phone calls. Her eyes moved back down to the duffel bag and the minimal clothes she had with her. Her fingers carefully brushed over a purple patterned top.

"Do you like that?" Max asked, her blue eyes sparkling with more excitement than El thought she had ever seen in the red head.

El looked around the Gap, her eyes wide and curious as she stared at all the different designs. Who knew there could be this much clothing. A new sense of apprehension filled her senses, and El couldn't help but feel nervous.

"How do I know...what I like?"

Max shrugged casually looking around, "you just try things on..." Her gaze landed on El, it was kind and trusting. "Until you find something that feels like you."

A sense of panic flickered into El's eyes, "like...me?" How could she possibly get the choice. How could she possibly choose for herself. She needed Mike's opinion, she needed Hop's approval.

Max smiled, a caring and beautiful smile. "Yeah. Not Hopper, not Mike, you."

El blinked and smiled slightly, as she felt the soft cotton shirt. The time she spent with Max had been something out of a Soap Opera. It was *fun* and freeing. She had felt...*normal*. Of course time with Mike

was magical, and despite Max's thoughts about stupid boys, El knew that it didn't *really* apply to Mike, Lucas, Dustin or Will. They were special. They would put their lives on the line to protect her and Max if needed. El had witnessed that.

Just like Max had wanted El to form her own opinion about her clothing choices, she now felt like her eyes had also been opened into becoming the person that *El* wanted to be. Not Mike, not Max, not Hop. *El*.

Her fingers clenched around the shirt and her eyelashes fluttered closed as she inhaled a heavy breath. Why did finding herself have to be so painful? Why did it have to involve so much loss? And how would she *know* when she had become the person she was meant to be? El opened her tired eyes and looked out of the window, watching as the rain splattered the window and slowly slid down the glass.

Who was she now? She wasn't Eleven and she was no longer El Hopper.

A tear slid down her cheek mimicking the rain, her emotions showering her like the heavy drops that landed on the dried grass.

El lay her forehead against the glass of the car window, watching the world go by as Joyce drove Jonathan, Will and El to the cabin. No one was talking and yet it wasn't uncomfortable. Jonathan and Will understood that the two women in the car were processing their own thoughts about going to the cabin. El didn't fully understand the relationship that Hop and Joyce had, but she recognised that blush in his cheeks when he spoke of her. It wasn't too different from the one El felt heat her own face when she thought of Mike.

A rumble of thunder filled the grey cloud filled sky as El looked up and wondered if they were in for a storm. Goosebumps rose to her arms as her mind flashed with memories of the Mind Flayer, the way it moved and the hundreds of sharp teeth as it opened its mouth. She flinched remembering the piercing to her leg, the way it had lifted her with such ease.

Her stomach turned as she remembered clinging onto Mike so tightly

that she was positive she had indented his arms with her fingernails. So many happy memories they had shared in the cabin, for that to be the last one. El closed her eyes and swallowed quietly as she tried to calm herself down and clear the blockage in her throat.

She could feel the tension in her chest tightening the closer they got to the cabin. And even with her eyes closed, she could feel the crunch of earth and gravel under the tyres of Joyce's car, meaning they were in the woods now, getting nearer to her first real home. A place she had first loathed for making her feel so trapped, and yet it had soon become her home when the brightness was brought back into her life. When Mike had come over every day, when she had got to decorate her bedroom.

And now it would be in shambles from the attack. It would resemble how she felt inside. Broken and vulnerable.

The car was slowing down, the road that Hop had created making the journey less bumpy. El didn't know if she could open her eyes, she didn't want to see her home destroyed. She didn't want the reality that she wouldn't be returning back to Hop, living her life as his daughter. Just as she had wanted to.

"El," came a surprisingly warm voice making El open her eyes. It was Will, his palm on the back of her cold hand. He had reached from the back seat and smiled kindly at her, with understanding. "Look," he told her.

El bit her lip, her eyes dancing between Will's chocolate brown eyes, trusting them. She hesitated for a moment before slowly turning her head just as Joyce stopped the car. She exhaled a shaky breath as her eyes went to the cabin, but not to the broken structure. To the strong and steady people stood in front of it, waiting for her. There to support her through this.

Nancy, Dustin, Lucas, Max and of course Mike.

El hadn't expected them all to come and found herself beyond grateful as she struggled to swallow the lump in her throat. She tugged down the sleeve of Mike's thin sweater that she wore and dabbed at the corners of her eyes.

Joyce reached over and clutched El's hand, "you are so loved sweetheart," she said through a wavering smile. Trying to also keep her emotions under control, despite how hard it was becoming.

El attempted to hold back a sob, if it was from anguish or relief she wasn't sure. All she knew was that she wasn't alone. She wouldn't have to go through any of this alone if she didn't want to. She *had* family. They were right here.

"Be careful where you stand honey," Joyce said in a strained voice, worry evident in her voice as she watched Mike and Max help El over the threshold of the cabin. Their shoes crunched over glass as they carefully manoeuvred around splintered wood and broken furniture.

Joyce felt pale as she looked around at the havoc that was the living area and kitchen. Her eyes hesitantly moved to El, who looked devastated at what her home had been reduced to. It was with a heavy heart that Joyce gave people jobs, wanting this to be over with as soon as possible for El.

Jonathan, Nancy, Will, Lucas and Dustin were directed to box up certain items in the living room and kitchen and to tidy up what they could, making the room look a little less war torn. Mike and Max were helping El in her bedroom and Joyce grabbed a couple of boxes and hesitantly moved to Hopper's bedroom.

Her strained eyes looked around the bedroom, the window had been smashed and a few things had fallen off the shelf, but otherwise Hop's room hadn't faired too poorly despite everything that had taken place at the cabin.

Joyce moved slowly to the bed, smiling slightly in tired amusement that the bed hadn't even been made. The blankets were pushed back as if Hop had only just jumped out of bed. She absentmindedly ran her hand across the soft cover, closing her eyes and remembering the argument they had at the cabin. It seemed so trivial now of course.

She sighed sadly and shook her head, trying to focus as she placed both empty boxes on the bed and looked around the room, wondering where to start. The closet seemed to make the most sense,

so Joyce heaved a deep breath, her small frame rising and falling as she steered herself towards the small built in closet Hop had made when extending the cabin.

Joyce bit her lip in apprehension as she opened the door, her eyes going immediately to the chequered shirts that were hung up neatly on clothes hangers. Joyce couldn't help but raise her eyebrows in surprise that it was so neat, it wasn't very *Hop*. She tried to ignore the horrible fleeting thought that she would never get the chance to ask him. Her heart felt heavy and she quickly wiped at her wet eyes, shaking her head that she was getting so emotional over shirts.

She bit her lip to try and contain the wobbling as her hand reached out towards the shirts, her fingers wrapped around the first hanger and she pulled the shirt out. She stared at it for a moment, her eyes quickly going between the closed curtain which was a door separator and back to the shirt. Joyce brought the material to her nose, and closed her eyes, breathing in the scent that was Hopper. She inhaled, her breath catching in her throat.

"What are you doing?"

Joyce startled, dropping the shirt, the clothes hanger making a clanging noise as it hit the side table before falling to the floor. El stood in the entrance way, looking so small and vulnerable that it took Joyce back to when she had sat with the young girl in Hawkins Middle School telling her how brave she was. Nothing had changed in that regard. Powers or not, El was still a strong and brave young woman who was willing to sacrifice for what she thought was right.

"Sorry," Joyce said in a choked voice, trying to laugh but feeling embarrassed as she stumbled to pick the shirt back up. She gathered the material in her hands, "I...I was just..." Whatever lie she was about to tell died on her tongue.

Joyce sighed in defeat and sat on the edge of the bed. She looked up at El, her eyes watery. "I was smelling it," she said, sniffling. "It...it smells like Hop," she added with a small smile. "I'm sorry if that's weird or - "

"No." El said cutting off a surprised Joyce. The young girl shook her

head as she stepped closer. "Not weird." She sat next to Joyce and reached for the shirt. "Comforting."

Joyce watched on as El brought the shirt to her own nose and took a deep breath, an almost relieved sigh leaving her mouth as she closed her eyes. "I liked these shirts on him," El muttered. "Better than the new ones."

Joyce grinned looking down at the chequered shirts. "I agree. I don't know who he thought he was trying to be with those other ones." Both women smiled, as they looked down at the material.

"He was trying to impress you," El said after a moment of silence making Joyce turn to look at her in surprise. But could Joyce really be surprised? She had known for a while Hop had feelings for her. And while she worried it was just because he may have felt lonely, she knew now it had been real.

Joyce closed her eyes tight and sighed a pain breath. "I wish I had done things differently."

"How?" El asked quietly, a tone of confusion in her voice.

Joyce opened her wet eyes and looked at the young woman. A sad smile flickered to her thin lips. "He asked me on a date."

"He did?"

"Yeah," Joyce laughed, a stabbing pain in her heart making her chest feel tight once more. Her smile faded as she looked ahead towards the shirts. "But I didn't go."

"Why not?"

"I got distracted. I didn't realise the time."

There was silence for a moment while they both contemplated this.

"Is that...the truth?" El asked quietly.

It took a moment for Joyce to take in what she had said as she turned to look at El who was watching her with curiosity. Joyce opened her

mouth to speak but no words would come out as she *truly* thought about El's words. Yes she had been distracted. She had been at Scott Clarke's trying to understand the mystery of her damn magnets falling off the wall.

But if there hadn't have been that distraction. Would she have *actually* gone?

"No." Joyce said as looked back at El, staring into her bright hazel eyes. "I was scared. After losing Bob I...he was - "

"A good man." El finished for Joyce, surprising her that she even *knew* about Bob.

"Will and Mike told me," the young woman explained, picking up on Joyce's train of thought and making her smile that the boys had told El about Bob. "And Hop."

"*Hop?*"

El nodded, "he said Bob was a hero. That none of you would have got out of the lab if it wasn't for him. That he was a kind man. The type of man you deserved."

Joyce didn't realise that she was crying until the tears slid off her sharp jaw and onto her clenched hands which held Hopper's shirt between their tight grasp. She had no idea that Hop had thought that highly of Bob, that he had been comparing himself this much. Did he *not* think that he too was a hero? That he wasn't kind and caring despite his flaws? That he couldn't have made her happy if she had just *let* him?

"I'm sorry," Joyce sniffled as she moved once of her hands to her face, using her fingers to wipe under her eyes.

El shook her head, "don't be sorry. I am sad too."

Joyce let out a wincing breath of grief as she reached for El, the young woman receiving the arms that were wrapped around her. They both cried, Joyce letting out the pain she had been trying to hide for so long and El embracing it.

"I miss him," Joyce admitted in a choked sob.

"Me too," El nodded into Joyce's shoulder, her voice wavering and her tears wetting the white shirt that Joyce wore. "We didn't get t-to say g-goodbye..."

"I know," Joyce whispered, her voice anguished as she held tighter onto El.

"He just w-wanted to protect us. *Me.*"

Joyce gasped trying to control her crying. She opened her red and swollen eyes and pulled back slightly so that she could cup El's blotchy wet cheeks. She looked into the sad and lost eyes of the young girl.

"And he *did*. El, he protected us all and that's all he would have wanted. He just wanted you, *all* of us to be *safe*." Joyce carefully wiped at the tears on El's face, keeping eye contact with her. A fire was starting in her chest, a fire of determination and grief to make a promise. Not only to El, but to Hop. "And I *promise* you I am going to respect his wishes. I am going to keep you safe no matter the cost El. I love you like a daughter, you are like one of my own. I will keep you *safe*."

El was too overwhelmed for words and nodded, her sobs becoming softer as she leaned back into Joyce's arms and let the comfort of a mother's embrace keep her safe and warm.

Mike wasn't surprised that it only took a few minutes in El's bedroom for her to want to leave the room. He could see from the distress in her eyes and the way she clenched her jaw that she was barely keeping herself together.

Her bedroom wasn't in as much disarray as the living room, but the window had blown, glass sparkled here and there on the floor and most of her possessions were scattered. Mike knew how upsetting it must be for her to see her first bedroom like this.

This had been her very first space that she could truly call her *own*.

Mike would be lying if he said it didn't hurt him too. He had spent every single day here for 6 months. Seeing it in such a state made him nauseous. The Mind Flayer had truly taken El's world and shattered it, and there was no stone left unturned. All Mike could do was try and rebuild it.

"What would you like us to pack El?" Max asked, her voice croaky. She had mumbled to Lucas and Dustin that she had a cold when they questioned her, but Mike couldn't help but think she sounded similar to El and Joyce. He frowned wondering if she was putting on a brave face too.

El had looked around her room, her eyes almost wild as she tried to decipher through the mess that would need sorting through. She looked to Mike and all he could do was smile kindly at her, reassurance in his eyes that all of her stuff would be okay. He would make sense of it all, even if it took him all day and all night.

"Max can you sort my clothes," El said, her eyes vulnerable as she looked at the red head who nodded and smiled slightly.

"Of course. I'm on it."

El bit her lip as her gaze flickered around the room before her hazel eyes landed on Mike. She didn't need to say a word for him to understand that pleading look that pierced his heart.

"I'll sort everything else," he promised her, his eyes determined and his posture strong.

A small smile curved El's lips, her face tired but her eyes sparkling with gratitude as she looked at him. That look was all Mike needed for his heart to race and for butterflies to flutter away in his stomach.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Mike smiled, almost scared to grin too much considering the circumstances. "Don't mention it," he said, clearing his throat, containing the smile as he stood awkwardly, looking around the room and wondering where to start.

El lowered her head, almost bashful before she heaved a sigh. "I will

go and get more boxes," she said looking between Mike and Max before leaving the room. Neither of them even questioned her, despite knowing they had more than enough boxes. It was clear she wanted to escape and they weren't about to stop her.

Mike stared at the doorway where El had just left, his eyes glazed over as he sighed, wanting her to truly be happy again. The 6 months of bliss with her had been perfect, everything he had ever wanted and dreamt of. But that was it...it had all been a dream.

"You really love her don't you?"

Mike jumped, his eyes quickly catching Max's gaze. She was sitting down by the bottom drawers of El's dresser, folding clothes for the box that was propped up next to her.

"I...um, I - "

Max laughed, shaking her head as she folded a sweater that Mike was sure had once belonged to him. "Boys," she sighed before looking back up at Mike who glared at her. "You admitted it already - "

"Yeah under duress!"

Max raised her eyebrow, "what, so don't you mean it now?"

"Of course I do," Mike snapped, his dark eyes narrowing at Max before he grabbed a box harshly and moved to the other side of the bedroom. There was a strained silence for the moment as Mike tried to control his anger towards Max. *Why did she always have to be so negative? So damn irritating.*

Mike sat on the end of El's bed and reached down for some of her momentos, his temper calming as his fingers carefully extracted her Valentine's card from under a pile of books, their pages open, the spines slightly wonky.

He held it in his grasp and a smile slowly flickered to life on his face as he remembered his nerves as he handed her the card. He hadn't expected her to know about Valentine's day, had never expected anything in return and yet El had known. She had put it down to Soap Operas and Joyce who had given her the material to make a

card that Mike now had in the top drawer of his desk. He usually found himself taking the card out and admiring it when he should be studying.

His fingertips touched the love heart and he sighed, "I wanted her to be the first to know..."

There was more silence for a moment until Max spoke, calmer this time. "That you love her?"

"Yeah..."

Max exhaled a short sigh. "Well don't leave it too long..."

Mike's brow creased in confusion and he turned to look at the red head. She was still folding clothes and had made a lot more progress with packing.

"Why?"

Max lifted her head from the dress she was folding. Her face looked serious but something had softened her blue eyes. Mike didn't think he had ever seen her this vulnerable looking.

"Because she deserves happiness," Max said simply before a smile, which Mike would only call mischievous curved her lips. "Because despite you being a bit of a dingus, she loves you." When Mike's eyebrows raised and his mouth opened to speak, Max added, "she hasn't *told* me that she loves you. But it's obvious."

"How is it obvious?" Mike couldn't help but ask, not even embarrassed by how desperate he sounded. If there was even a *chance* that El reciprocated his love, he *needed* to know.

Max laughed, shaking her head in amusement. "Because she acts just like *you* do."

"And how is that?" Mike asked frowning. He was *positive* he wasn't that obvious about his feelings in front of everyone.

Max laughed as she placed the dress into the box. "You both get these love heart eyes and it's like everyone else has left the room. When

newsflash, we're still there."

Mike watched Max continue to pack for a moment as he contemplated her words. She looked up at him and rolled her eyes, "are you going to pack anything?"

Startling Mike back into reality he hurried to grab some of El's teddies and carefully place them in the box with the Valentine's card.

"If it wasn't obvious how much you loved El before...it was blindingly obvious after everything that happened..." Max continued, her voice quiet and slightly wavering.

Mike was surprised that Max had continued the conversation, they barely spoke and when they did speak, it was usually only to argue. He watched her for a moment with hesitation frowning his face. Max wasn't looking at him, just quietly getting on with her task. Mike realised being busy right now seemed to suit her.

"How...um, how are you doing after...everything..." Mike wouldn't have believed it was him who was speaking if it wasn't for his mouth moving.

Max heard his words, her jaw twitching as she blinked rapidly for a moment before continuing with her task. She wouldn't look at him. "I'm fine."

It was so blatantly a lie that Mike couldn't help but laugh. It was that notion that caused Max to glance at him, confusion on her pained face.

"So I'm not the only one hiding something," Mike said, both of them staring at one another before they both broke out in small smiles of acceptance. They worked in silence for a while longer, this time more comfortably. Mike would ask Max's opinion on certain things to pack, and the redhead teased Mike when he asked if she wanted a hand and she stated that she was sorting El's underwear.

His subsequent bright red face kept her giggling for a good 10 minutes while Mike tried not to take a peak at whatever Max was now packing and concentrated on his own tasks.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?" he asked distractedly as he put some of El's books back together and packed them. A lot of them were old ones of Nancy's that she handed down to El.

"I'm sorry."

Mike's face knitted in confusion as he looked over at Max. She stood now having finished packing El's clothes. She held her hands together, her fingers moving slightly as if she was nervous.

"What for?"

Max shrugged, wrapping her arms around herself. "For thinking you were controlling El."

Mike narrowed his eyes wondering if she meant it. He knew that he and Max argued a lot, but that argument probably hurt the most. How could anyone think he would want to control El? Especially considering her past and how deeply he loved her. He wanted her free from it all more than anyone else. However, he knew that he wasn't the *only* one that loved her.

"I'm sorry for thinking you were using her powers..." Mike mumbled, looking at Max cautiously at first. "I know you care about her too."

Max smiled and nodded her head, "I do. I'm new to this whole best friend who's a girl you know. I guess we both got wrapped up in that. I was on the defense for her and I guess she was trying to impress me with her powers." Max laughed gently, "I mean it *worked*. But she's totally awesome with or without her powers."

"Yeah," Mike grinned, sighing lightly. "She is awesome either way." His eyes trailed away from back to the box of her personal things that he had been packing. He caught sight of the Valentine's card again and cleared his throat catching Max's attention.

"Did you ask her to dump me? I didn't even know she knew that word..."

Max grinned and shook her head. "I didn't tell her to just *dump* your

ass. I said you'd come crawling back and that if you didn't, and you didn't *explain* yourself, *then* she should dump your ass."

Mike tried not to pout too much as he mumbled, "I *did* try and explain myself."

Max laughed, "you *lied* remember."

"Yeah well Hopper made me okay?! And I *did* try and tell her the truth...afterwards..."

"When?" Max asked in amusement as she sat on the bed, crossing her arms.

"At the pool," Mike said, his voice more whiny than he would like to admit. "I came to get the resuscitation dummy and El had it, so I took it off her and *tried* to make her laugh. Well, that didn't work so then I apologised and told the truth. But she thought Hop was right. And *okay* maybe he kind of was. I *was* keeping her to myself, I get that now. But I just - "

"Love her."

"Yeah," Mike nodded, clearing his throat and averting his eyes to the floor. The room was peaceful as the two teens sat in silence, processing everything that had been said between them.

Eventually it was Max who spoke up. "You know that you two aren't the average high school romance right?"

Mike laughed shaking his head in amusement and slight annoyance as he looked at the red head. "Yeah, I gathered that."

Max rolled her eyes and then smiled, sighing in exasperation. "I meant that as a good thing dummy." She looked at Mike for a moment and nodded slightly, "I think you two will make it."

Mike couldn't help the beacon of light that shone in his heart or the large relieved smile that spread across his lips.

"Thanks Max."

"You're welcome dummy."

El hesitantly pushed opened the door to her bedroom, expecting a blazing arguing to be in the process between Mike and Max. But instead she only found Mike sat cross legged on her bed, carefully put her more delicate momentos in bubble wrap.

She paused by the door for a moment, a soft smile on her lips and warmth in her chest as she watched the boy she loved. He was so concentrated on doing a good job, his lips were poised and his face was tense as he carefully wrapped up ornaments. El waited until Mike had put in the sealed item into box before she made her presence known.

"Where is Max?"

El asked her question quietly but Mike still jumped, his startled face only making her want to smile more which was incredibly welcome considering the vast emotions that she was experiencing. Happiness was always welcome.

Mike coughed, clearing his throat, "her and Lucas have been taking your boxed clothes to the car. They just took the last box."

El nodded as she walked over to the boy who watched her with nervous eyes. She sat next to him, not realising how he was staring at her as her hazel eyes flickered around her bare room instead. Her gaze looked over the soft green walls and she smiled.

"Do you remember that day? When we painted?"

Mike chuckled, shuffling slightly closer to El as he too looked around at the walls. "Yeah of course. Hopper bought pink paint but you said you wanted green instead."

"I like green."

"I know. So he came back with the paint, and you and I painted with Will's help of course. He's the neatest." El and Mike continued to stare at the bare wall, their hearts racing.

"And Hop was annoyed that we were all making too much noise," El said grinning.

"So you splattered him with paint," Mike chuckled in response. "And more paint ended up on him rather than on the walls. That was when he had to shave off his beard, right?"

El nodded, smirking. "And then he grew that weird hair thing above his lip."

"The moustache? Yeah...what the hell was that about?!"

"I don't know." El's smile faded slightly, her hand had moved in the small gap between her and Mike. "I miss him. I miss his *moustache*."

His warm palm covered the back of her hand, his fingers naturally locking with her own. That spark passing between them.

"I miss him too," Mike whispered, hesitantly looking away from the wall and to El. She gulped nervously and turned to catch his gaze.

He sighed, his eyes sad. "I wish...I wish I hadn't been an arsehole to him. That I had actually let him *talk* to us. I was rude. And the maybe..."

El watched Mike, captivated by his every word. Her eyes wide and beseeching. "Maybe?"

Mike bit his lip and looked straight into El's eyes. She felt incredibly exposed, and yet she didn't mind. She wanted him to see the complexity of emotions that she held. She wanted him to know all her secrets.

"Maybe if we had spoken to him. Let *him* speak, then you and I would still be - "

It was as if a vinyl scratched and broke the moment as music, *loud* music played from the living room. Mike and El both turned their heads towards where the beautiful guitar sound filled the air before the voice of Jim Croce singing filled El's ears and her heart.

Well, I know it's kind of late

I hope I didn't wake you

But what I've got to say can't wait

I know you'd understand

'Cause every time I tried to tell you

The words just came out wrong

So I'll have to say "I love you" in a song

Yeah, I know it's kind of strange

Every time I'm near you

I just run out of things to say

I know you'd understand

'Cause every time I tried to tell you

The words just came out wrong

So I'll have to say "I love you" in a song

As if she was sleepwalking, El stood up, Mike's hand still in hers as she walked towards the music, bringing him along with her. They entered the living room and stopped at the sight.

Joyce was stood next to the vinyl player, Jonathan had his arm around her as she dabbed at her tears. Nancy and Max were sat on the counter, Lucas, Dustin and Will sat against the wall. All of them listening to the music.

El's eyes filled with tears but she smiled, listening to the music that Hop had loved the most. She looked at Joyce, grateful that she had filled the cabin with beautiful sounds again.

Joyce gazed back at her, a smile on her face, her eyes wet but bright as she said, "I know the perfect way for us to say goodbye to Hop."

That night the Byers back yard came alive. Max and Nancy strung Joyce's Christmas lights across the fencing, Dustin and Lucas lit a bonfire while Mike and Jonathan set up Hopper's vinyl player at full volume.

Steve arrived with food and Dustin and Lucas provided camping chairs as they all sat around the fire.

El tried smores for the first time, Mike explained the concept as he carefully crafted a smore for her while she looked on in amazement. Max watched them with a playful smirk before demanding Lucas to make her one. It was his seventh attempt at winning her back. It worked.

The storm had cleared, the sky was filled with fireflies and the occasional plume of smoke as Joyce tried one of Hopper's cigarettes, spluttering and laughing at how disgusting she found it.

The atmosphere was vibrant. It was filled with laughter as Joyce told the party stories about Hopper. There was no guilt over smiling, no guilt over filling their lungs with warmth as they shared tales and listened to Jim Croce on repeat.

When *Don't Mess Around With Jim* came on, El explained how Hopper used to dance to it. With some cheering and encouragement from the party, she stood up, giggling as she showed them the dance. Mike was positive in that moment that he fell even more in love with her.

They all danced, ate and shared memories. It was the goodbye that El knew Hopper would have wanted. And as they lay under the stars in sleeping bags, El stared up at the stars, thinking of how lucky she was to have been the Chief's daughter. She would *never* forget him. She would *never* want a world without him, but she had to live.

Well, I'm sorry for the things that I told you

But words only go so far

And if I had my way

I would reach into heaven

And I'd pull down a star for a present

And I'd make you a chain out of diamonds

And pearls from a summer sea

But all I can give you is a kiss in the morning

And a sweet apology

Well, I know that it hasn't been easy

And I haven't always been around

To say the right words

Or to hold you in the morning

Or to help you when you're down

I know I never showed you much of a good time

But baby things are gonna change

I'm gonna make up for all of the hurt I brought

I'm gonna love away all your pain

And tomorrow's gonna be a brighter day

There's gonna be some changes

Tomorrow's gonna be a brighter day

This time you can believe me

No more crying in your lonely room

And no more empty nights

'Cause tomorrow morning everything will turn out right

El smiled, her heavy eyes slowly closing. Tomorrow was going to be a

brighter day.

AN: Please let me know what you thought! I think I liked it, but has the surgery messed me up and I'm wrong?! Let me know pretty please with Eggos on top! Thank you so much for reading :-)